Noel Malcolm

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by Noel Malcolm

Editor's Note: The turmoil in the Balkan Peninsula in recent years has led some of the world's sharpest minds to focus on the history of that tragic region. Their discoveries are of interest to all who are concerned with the Balkans, including the Vlachs, as the following excerpt shows.

Although there are many recorded cases of Catholics being converted to Orthodoxy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Bosnia, it is clear that this spread of the Orthodox Church did not happen by conversion alone. In the areas where Orthodoxy made its most striking gains, especially in northern Bosnia, the same period saw a large influx of settlers from Orthodox lands. It was evidently deliberate policy on the part of the Ottomans to fill up territory which had been depopulated, either by war or by plague. There are signs in the earliest defters (Turkish tax records) of groups of Christian herdsman, identifiable as Vlachs, being settled in devasted areas of eastern Hercegovinia.

In the defters of the 1470s and 1480s they can be seen spreading into central and north-central Bosnia, in the regions round Visoko and Maglaj: soon after 1476, for example, roughly 800 Vlach families were settled in the Maglaj district, accompanied by two Orthodox priests. The number of Vlachs in north-central and north-east Bosnia continued to grow over the next fifty years, and they began to spread into north-west Bosnia too.

During the wars of the early sixteenth century more areas of northern Bosnia became depopulated as Catholics fled into Hapsburg territory. Since it was particularly important for the Ottomans not to leave land empty close to the military border, there were large new influxes of Vlach settlers from Hercegovina and Serbia. Further movements into this area took place throughout the sixteenth century; plague, as well as war, left demographic gaps which needed to be filled.

As early as 1530, when the Habsburg official Benedict Kuripe?ic travelled through Bosnia, he was able to report that the country was inhabited by three peoples, One was the Turks, who ruled "with great tyranny" over the Christians. Another was "the old Bosnians, who are of the Roman Catholic faith." And the third were "Serbs, who call themselves Vlachs . . . They came from Smederovo and Belgrade." So important was the Vlach element in the creation of this Bosnian Orthodox population that, three centuries later, the term "Vlach" was still being used in Bosnia to mean "member of the Orthodox Church."

Of course, non-Vlach Serbians and Hercegovinans also took part in this process of settlement. The problem of distinguishing them, and of saying what the term "Vlach" meant during this period, will be discussed below. But it is clear that Vlachs, as a distinctive ethnic and cultural group, played a major role. The Vlachs were particularly suitable for the Ottoman government's purposes, not only because they were mobile (their typical occupations were shepherding, horse-breeding and organizing transport for traders), but also because they had a strong military tradition. Special arrangements were made to induce them to move to the Ottoman-Habsburg border: the tax on sheep was reduced for those living in the border region, and their leaders were granted large timars (land holdings). Although they received no military salary, they were entitled to carry arms and expected to fulfil a military role; in place of a salary, they were permitted to plunder enemy territory. Known by the terms "martolos" or "vojnuk", they became the most feared element in the Ottoman military machine.

At the same time, Vlachs and Serbs who had fled northwards from the Ottoman advance in the fifteenth century, and who had similar military traditions, began to be organized by the Habsburgs on the other side of this fluid and shifting border. Vlachs from inside Bosnia also crossed the border to join them; the three reasons given by Benedict Kuripesic for the depopulation of Bosnia in the early sixteenth century were plague, the devshirme (collection of male Christian children), and the flight of the Serb-Vlach martolosi across the border. In 1527, after his election as King of Hungary and Croatia, Ferdinand I of Austria established a formal system of land-holdings and military duties for them. They were free of feudal obligations, permitted a share of booty, allowed to elect their own captains (*vojvode*) and magistrates (*knezovi*), and free to practise Orthodox Christianity. In this way, a special system of land tenure and military organization grew up under the Habsburgs, the so-called *Militargrenze* or *vojna krajina* (military border), which was eventually to involve a strip of territory twenty to sixty miles wide and a thousand miles long. The borderers or *Grenzer* on the north and north-western frontier of Bosnia, equally renowned for their military prowess and ferocity, were known as "Vlachs" or "Morlachs", and in 1630 their privileges were re-established by Ferdinand II in a document known as the "Law of the Vlachs" -- "Statuta Valachorum". Apart from the big set-piece compaigns, the military struggle between Ottoman and Habsburg on this border consisted mainly, year in, year out, of Vlachs fighting Vlachs.

Who were the Vlachs, and where, originally, did they come from? This is one of the most vexed questions in Balkan history. Vlachs are found today scattered over many parts of the Balkans; the biggest concentration is in the Pindus mountains of northern Greece, but there are also Vlachs in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania and Serbia, as well as the remnants of a Vlach population in the Istrian peninsula. Tradtionally they were herdsmen and shepherds practising a form of

semi-nomadism called transhumance, in which flocks are moved, sometimes over great distances, between a regular summer pasture in the mountains and a regular winter pasture elsewhere. Some grew rich from the products of their pastoral life: wool, cheese and livestock. Many also became well known in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as merchants and international traders.

These occupations have changed very little over the centuries; one twelfth-century Byzantine poem refers to Vlach cheese, which was famous in Constantinople, and to a Vlach cloak, the large black sleeveless cape (*talagan* or *tambari*) which can still be seen on the shoulders of Balkan shepherds. Other Byzantine writers refer to to the transhumance of the Vlachs, and medieval Serbian documents refer to them as shepherds and *kjelatori* -- a version of the Latin *calator*, "packhorse-leader", surviving in modern Vlach as *calator*, "traveller". Their only other distinctive occupation at that period was fighting: as hardy mountain-dwellers they were valued for their stamina, and their supply of horses made them useful adjuncts to any military campaign. The Byzantine authorities seem not to have trusted them very much, and generally used them as auxiliaries; sometimes they functioned as quite independent irregular troops. But there are also references to an entire regiment of Vlach infantry in an early fourteenth-century Byzantine army.

In the early records the Vlachs are often a rather shadowy, passing presense. They moved from area to area, speaking the local language and merging into the local population: there are references in late Byzantine documents to "Bulgaro-Albano-Vlachs" and even "Serbo-Albano-Bulgaro-Vlacs". Other names for them include the Byzantine Greek "Mavrovlachos", "black Vlach", from which "Morlach" was derived, and the modern Greek "Koutsovlachos", literally "limping Vlach", which may be a folk-etymologized version ot the Turkish *kucuk eflak*, "little Vlach". the word "Vlach" itself comes from a term used by the early Slavs for those peoples they encountered who spoke Latin or Latinate languages: hence also "Wallachian", "Walloon" and and (by a more roundabout application) "Welsh".

There is no definite historical record of the Vlachs before the late tenth century. Before that, the only evidence which can be drawn on is linguistic. The Vlach language is a Latin language, very closely related to Romanian: linguists call it "Macedo-Romanian", and the Romanian of Romania "Daco-Romanian". Obviously it was the product of the Roman colonization of the Balkans, and had a continuous existence there, being encountered by the Slavs on their arrival in the sixth and seventh centuries. But the Roman empire in the Balkans covered a wide area, and this has given plenty of scope for modern nationalist historians to locate the origins of the Vlachs in whichever area they prefer: thus Greeks claim that the Vlachs are Romanized Greeks, Bulgarians say they are Romanized

Dacians (and/or descendants of Roman legionaries in Dacia: it does not matter which, so long as they were there before the arrival of the Hungarians).

By far the most picturesque -- and preposterous -- theory is the one put forward by the distinguished Croat historian Father Mandic, who, investigating the origins of the Vlach-Serbs of Bosnia, has concluded that they were originally from Morocco. This, he thinks, would explain the Byzantine Greek word "Mavrovlachos" or "black Vlach": a reference to their dark, Moorish faces. His theory is that they are the descendants of Roman legionaries from Mauretania (modern Morocco) who were stationed in the Balkans. It is true that large numbers of legionaries were settled there by the Romans; but they included, as we have seen, people from all over the Empire. Of the only two military colonies of Mauretanians mentioned by Mandic, one was near the Black Sea in Bessarabia, and the other was on the river Inn, near Vienna. That is hardly a sufficient starting-point for an entire population in the southern Balkans. Though it will of course delight modern anti-Serb nationalists in Bosnia to learn that the Bosnian Serbs are really Africans (and it certainly trumps the modern Serb prejudice towards Albanians, which tends to treat them as if they were dark-faced people from the Third World), the theory cannot possibly be correct.

The true origin of the Vlachs can be worked out, however, from the linguistic evidence. The Vlach-Romanian language (which was a single language until the two main forms of it began to diverge in the early middle ages) has a large number of special features in common with Albanian. These include fundamental matters of grammar and syntax, a number of special idioms, and a core vocabulary of words connected with pastoral life. Albanian, the one survivor of the languages of the Illyrian tribes, also contains a huge number of words borrowed from Latin, indicating close contact with a Latinized population throughout the Roman period. A combination of historical linguistics, the study of place-names and the history of the Roman Empire yields the fairly certain conclusion that the heartland where both these languages developed was an area stretching from northern Albania through Kosovo and south-central Serbia: it may also have included parts of northern Macedonia and western Bulgaria. Most of the Romanized and Latin-speaking population of this area (whose version of Latin was influenced by their own language, Illyrian) was dispersed, destroyed or assimilated by the invasions of the dark ages, especially those of the Slavs. A remnant which practised pastoralism was able to survive in the mountains, unaffected by the Slavs' takeover of settled agriculture; and in the more remote mountains (especially those of northern Albania) it was also in close contact with an even earlier remnant, which still spoke the Illyrian language, albeit a version of Illyrian which had become heavily infused with Latin after centuries of contact. That is the explanation accepted by nearly all the independent scholars who have studied this question; unfortunately the issue has been bedevilled by

misplaced national pride on the part of Romanian writers, who cannot accept that the first speakers of Romanian came from south of the Danube.

Since this northern Albanian and southern Serbian region was the original heartland of the Vlachs, it is not surprising that they should have spread out into the nearby uplands of Hercegovina from an early period. From there they moved northwards through the mountainous Dalmatian hinterland, where they are found tending flocks (and bringing them down to the coastal lands in the winter) as early as the twelfth century. There are many references to them in the records of Ragusa and Zadar from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Some of these pastoral Vlachs also penetrated as far as central Bosnia, where medieval place-names in the regions of Sarajevo and Travnik indicate their presence: Vlahinja, Vlaskovo, Vlasic. And many Vlach words connected with pastoral life were absorbed into Bosnian dialects of Serbo-Croat: *trze*, a late-born lamb, from the Vlach *tirdziu*, for example, or *zarica*, a type of cheese, from the Vlach *zara*. This last word is in fact a version of the Albanian word *dhalle*, "buttermilk" -- one of many details pointing to the pastoral symbiosis between Vlachs and Albanians, which continued to operate over a long period.

Most of these early Dalmatian and Bosnian Vlachs seem to have led quiet, secluded lives in the mountains. But in Hercegovina itself, where there was a large concentration of Vlachs, a more military and aggressive tradition developed. There are many complaints in Ragusan records of raids by these neighboring Vlachs during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The Vlachs of Hercegovina were horse-breeders and caravan-leaders who, when they were not engaged in plunder, grew rich out of the trade between Ragusa and mines of Bosnia; some of them were probably responsible for commissioning the imposing Bosnian stone tombstones or *stecci* decorated with carvings of horsemen. Their trading links to the east must have brought them more into contact with the Vlach peoples of Serbia and Bulgaria, who had long traditions of military activity in the armies of the Byzantine emperors and Serbian kings.

One of the still unsolved mysteries of this story is the exact significance of the term "Morlach" ("Mavrovlachos", "black Vlach"), and how it came to be used in Hercegovina and Dalmatia. The obvious original meaning was a reference to the black cloaks worn by the Vlachs of the central Balkans (Serbia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, northern Greece): they were also known at various times as "Karagounides" and "Crnogunjci", which literally mean "black-cloaks" in Turco-Greek and Serbian. Possibly a distinct wave of these Vlachs entered Hercegovina and Dalmatia, bringing the name (which they must have acquired in a Greek-speaking area) with them. It was quickly altered by Slav folk-etymology into "Morovlah", meaning "sea-Vlach" (i.e. coastal Vlach). From its use in Dalmatia the term later spread to the Vlachs in Croatia who filled the military border-zone

or "krajina" round the north-western shoulder of Bosnia. "Morlacchi" became the standard Venetian name for these people, and region appears as "Morlacchia" on many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century maps. Because of their fearsome methods of irregular warfare the Morlachs acquired an evil reputation, and were regarded as primitive and brutal people. But all changed in the late eighteenth century when they were visited by an Italian priest, the Abbe Fortis. Inspired by the poetry of Ossian, and accompanied by another enthusiast for heroic poetry and folklore, the Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, Fortis travelled among the Morlachs of the Dalmatian hinterland in search of poetry and primitive virtue. He found both: "The sincerity, trust, and honesty of these poor people...in all the ordinary actions of their life, would be called simplicity and weakness among us," he declared. He also heard plenty of poetry, noting that "A Morlacco travels along the desert mountains singing, especially in the night time, the actions of ancient *Slavi* Kings, and barons, or some tragic event"; and he observed that "the Bosnian dialect, spoken by the inland Morlacchi, is more harmonious, in my opinion, that the littoral Illyrian". The poem he printed in translation, *Hasanaganica* ("The Wife of Hasan Aga"), was in fact a Bosnian Muslim song; a short tale of tragic love and misunderstanding, it became one of the most popular specimens of folk poetry in the whole of Europe, and was translated by Goethe, Byron, Sir Walter Scott, Mérimée, Pushkin and Lermontov.

Inside Bosnia, the term Morlach was not so much used for the martial Vlachs who went to fill the border areas under the Ottomans. These Vlachs, who came from both Hercegovina and Serbia, were called either Vlachs or martolosi. The latter word referred to their military status, and so could include non-Vlachs too: it was a version of the Greek word for an armed man, *armatolos.* The Vlachs of Bosnia and Hercegovina had their own system of social and military organization, which is clearly defined in the early Ottoman documents: at the top of each local community was a magistrate or knez (an old Slav term); under him was a mayor or *primikur* (from the Greek, *primikerios*); below him was a *lagator* (from the Greek *alagator*, the head of a military detachment), and the basic military group was a *gonder* (from the Greek *kontarion*, or lance.) As these terms show, the Ottomans simply inherited a system which had been established to serve the armies of the Byzantine Empire. Like the Byzantine and Serbian rulers before them, they gave the Vlachs special tax privileges in return for their military services: the leaders of the Vlachs were given timars and treated virtually as spahis (Turkish cavalrymen), and their people were freed from the basic tax on non-Muslims, the haraç. The Vlachs did, however, pay a special "Vlach tax" -- *rusum-i eflak* -- consisting mainly of a sheep and a lamb from every household on St. George's day each year. Since they were taxed differently, they were listed differently in the Turkish defters. This enables us to see that in the late fifteenth century there were at least 35,000 Vlachs in Hercegovina, and in the sixteenth century as many as 82,692 mainly Vlach households (including some

non-Vlach martolosi, with similar privileges) in the Smederovo region to the south of Belgrade. (Many of the Vlachs in the eastern part of Hercegovina had themselves been moved there by the Turks to repopulate areas devasted by fighting in the 1460s.) These were the main reservoirs of population from which the depopulated lands of northern Bosnia were filled. And because, living in Hercegovina and Serbia, they had long been members of the Orthodox Church, they established the Orthodox presence in that part of Bosnia which has lasted ever since.

How distinct were these Vlachs from the surrounding Slavs? Clearly they had a different status and a different social-military organization. Those who had moved into northern Bosnia could not practise the tradition of long-distance transhumance, and the evidence of sixteenth-century Ottoman decrees on the Vlachs of Bosnia and Hercegovina indicates that the majority of Vlachs were now sedentary; but their way of life still centred on stock-breeding and shepherding. Giovanni Lovrich noted in the 1770s that the Croatian Morlachs all had flocks of 200, 300 or 600 sheep, and when he asked why they were so reluctant to till the soil, they replied: "Our ancestors didn't do it, so neither shall we." Some writers, especially Serbian ones, have argued that the term "Vlach" was used just to mean "shepherd" and did not imply any ethnic or linguistic difference -- so that most of these people were really just Serbs with sheep. This view is rejected by the leading modern expert on Vlachs in the early Ottoman Balkans, who insists that they were regarded as distinct population.

Vlachs have always been bilingual, and since they were never the administrators, the language which has survived in the records is never their own one. But we do have some evidence of its use, apart from the appearance in the records of Vlach personal names such as Ursul and Sarban. Vlachs who moved to an Adriatic island in the fifteenth century were still speaking Vlach there four hundred years later. One sixteenth-century Venetian writer described the Vlachs of the Dalmatian hinterland as speaking "Latin, though in a corrupted form"; shepherds in those mountains were still using Vlach counting-words as recently as 1985. There is other evidence of bilingualism in the seventeenth century, even though the writer Ioannes Lucius (Ivan Lukic) stated that the language had disappeared by then. But of course, having lived for centuries among the Slavs of Hercegovina and Serbia, these Vlachs could be outwardly indistinguishable (in speech and dress) from the ordinary Slavs of those regions. The suggestion that they must have been monoglot Vlachs, because they did not bring the Serbian *ekavian* dialect when they came from Serbia into northern Bosnia, is certainly false. They spoke whatever the Slavs around them spoke, which may have changed over time in an area as subject to demographic flux as northern Bosnia; and the Vlachs from Hercegovina would have spoken *jekavian* anyway.

Some attempts have been made to prove that there was still a Vlach-speaking population in Bosnia as recently as the beginning of the twentieth century. Sixteen "Romanian-speaking" villages were mentioned in the 1910 census for Bosnia, and in 1906 an enthusiastic Romanian Vlachophile published an entire about the "Romanian colonies" which he had found there. When the leading German expert on the Vlachs, Professor Weigand, went to check these claims in the following year, he found that the only Vlach villages consisted of people who had migrated from Macedonia in the eighteenth century and had since lost the use of their language. The "Romanian-speaking" villagers, known locally as "Karavlasi" or "black Vlachs", were indeed speaking Romanian; this was because they were not Vlachs at all, but Romanian gypsies from Transylvania.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that there is little sense today in saying that the Bosnian Serbs are "really" Vlachs. Over the centuries many ordinary members of the Serbian Orthodox Church would have crossed the Drina into Bosnia or moved north from Hercegovina; a Serb merchant class also became important in Bosnian towns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Not all the people who were sent to populate northern Bosnia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were Vlach, and since then there have been so many influxes and exoduses in Bosnian history that we cannot possibly calculate precise percentages for the "Vlach" ancestry of the Bosnian Serbs. Nor did the Vlachs contribute only to the Serb population; some (mainly in Croatia) became Catholics, and quite a few were Islamicized in Bosnia. To call someone a Serb today is to use a concept constructed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries out of a combination of religion, language, history and the person's own sense of identification: modern Bosnian Serbs can properly describe themselves as such, regardless of Vlach ancestry. But it is still slightly piquant to think, when one hears so-called right-wing Russian politicians talking about the need to defend their ancient Slav brothers in Bosnia, that the one component of the Bosnian population which has a large and identifiable element of non-Slav ancestry is the Bosnian Serbs.

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